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Washington Merry-Go-Round

By JACK ANDERSON

LAS VEGAS — Senate sleuths are investigating two $50,000 contributions to President Nixon from billionaire Howard Hughes. The money was handed over in cash to the President's friend, Bebe Rebozo, in 1969 and 1970.

Although Hughes' aides describe the $100,000 as a "campaign contribution," the President wasn't running for office in 1969 or 1970. The Senate Watergate Committee is investigating reports that the money may have been diverted to the President's personal use.

This is vigorously denied by White House spokesman Gerard Warren, who said: "The President never received any such money." Rebozo refused to comment on the charges. Sources close to him, however, stated that neither he nor the President have ever used campaign money for personal purposes.

We first reported on August 6, 1971, that Hughes' aides "siphoned off $100,000 from the Silver Slipper, a Hughes gambling emporium, for Nixon's campaign. The money was delivered by Richard Danner, a Hughes exec, to Bebe Rebozo, a Nixon confidant."

Watergate investigators have now verified our story from some of the principals. The payments to Nixon, the probers have been told, began in late 1969 at a time when Hughes was consolidating his hotel-casino empire in Nevada. His private papers, which have been made available to us, show he was trying to overcome resistance from the Justice Department's antitrust division.

The first $50,000 was slipped to Rebozo in late 1969 not long after the President personally approved Hughes' purchase of the airline, Air West. The money was delivered by Hughes hotelman Dick Danner to Rebozo, the Senate investigators have been told.

The second $50,000 contribution was made in the summer of 1970 when Hughes became the largest casino operator in the world with the purchase of Harrold's Club in Nevada. Again, it was Danner who passed the money to Rebozo. But this time, another Hughes factotum, Robert Maheu, witnessed the transaction. We have learned that Maheu spoke candidly to the committee about the deal.

Witnesses have told the Watergate investigators that the $100,000 positively was intended for Nixon, not Rebozo. What the President did with the money, if he received it, remains a mystery.

SAN CLEMENTE DEAL

In 1969 and 1970, he was completing the purchase of his San Clemente estate. Both Rebozo and another Nixon crony, aerosol king Robert Abplanalp, participated in the acquisition.

The financial details were handled by the President's personal attorney, Herbert Kalmbach, who has denied that any campaign contributions were used.

FOOTNOTE: More than a decade earlier, then-Vice President Nixon was hit by a blast of bad publicity over a $205,000 loan, which his brother Donald received from the same Howard Hughes. The loan was secured by a mortgage on a Whittier, Calif., lot that cost $13,000. The loan was never repaid.

PAINFUL PILGRIMAGE: Families of American servicemen missing in action in Indochina are planning a painful pilgrimage to Laos for news of their 400 unforgotten loved ones.

The relatives hope to set up a "mercy vigil" at the Vientiane talks between the Communist Pathet Lao and the royal government. In an initial agreement, the two sides agreed to repatriate all prisoners and to pass on information about all missing men.

This stirred a breath of hope here at the National League of Families which is still seeking to learn the fate of the 1,300 men missing in Indochina, some 400 of them in or near Laos.

In recent days, the league's energetic head, Iris Powers, and executive director, retired Air Force Col. Scott Albright, both of whom have sons missing, have been contacting members of families who, like themselves, still are torn between hope and resignation.

"A show of numbers may produce some shred of information," Albright, a chipper but sad-eyed man told us. "We hope to fill every hotel room in Vientiane during the talks."

An American military team has already been organized in Thailand and only awaits permission from the Communists to scour the jungles and mountains for news. Impractical as it sounds, several grey-haired mothers have begged to go from village to village in the treacherous terrain in quest of word on their sons' fates.

FOOTNOTE: The National League of Families, all but forgotten now that it has won the fight to get the living home from Vietnam, is so broke that it depends almost entirely on voluntary help and the kindness of the American Legion which gives them rent-free office space.